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ABSTRACT

This document provides a proven framework in which successful foreign study programs have been mounted at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Emphasis is placed on program objectives, program ingredients, admissions, overseas academic evaluation, program orientations, expenses, pre-departure information, role of study abroad advisory committee, the program resident director, evaluation of programs, exploration for new programs, and publicizing programs. (Author/HJM)

Approaches to Establishing and Improving Foreign Study Programs for American Campuses

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Office of Overseas Academic Programs
State University of New York at Buffalo

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The following pages are designed primarily for neophytes who wish to learn what should be kept in mind in launching effective foreign study programs, and in strengthening those already in operation. Attention is also given to how one may go about instituting and improving programs.

By no means exhaustive, these pages, nonetheless, provide a proven framework in which successful foriegn study programs have been mounted at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

My remarks represent an up-dated version of a speech, given at the annual meeting of the American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers, on April 20, 1972, in Cleveland, Ohio.

James A. Michielli
Director, Overseas Academic
Programs
SUNY Buffalo
June, 1974

The many study programs overseas sponsored by American campuses suggest that methodology abounds for establishing them, and that, therefore, some procedures, tested successfully, should be put forth that will, hopefully, enrich and improve existing programs and provide a sound basis for instituting others. Recognizing the current retrenchment facing American campuses, it might well be that what I have to say relates more to operative programs.

When I speak of sponsored programs, I am talking about those whose leadership, development, organization, supervision and evaluation are carried out by an American campus with a foreign university, although the genre of the overseas base may vary. I have borrowed much from my overseas program experiences at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Procedures for establishing sponsored study abroad programs might be broken down into the following broad categories, none of which I consider sacrosanct but, which, nonetheless, suggest an identification of the major ingredients: guidelines for outlining a program; ways of casting its structure; mechanisms for controlling quality and setting policy; methods for handling vital administrative and academic details; tools for finalizing establishment; vehicles for announcing student and faculty recruitment; and means available to facilitate student re-entry on campus.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

Formulation of a study abroad program should begin with a clear set of objectives, which outline its parameters and give it a configuration. Its architects, often both faculty and administrators, must agree on what the program should achieve and why. From my point of view, the specific objectives should reflect the whole experience overseas. What is learned inside the classroom as well as outside it should complement the other so that cultural immersion is an integral part of the overall educational program design. Whether a student is taught anthropology, history, literature, sociology or some other field, I regard the classroom experience as an outgrowth of the social institutions of the foreign culture. The principal objective should be an enriching process which brings together those academic and cultural experiences not afforded the student on his home campus and in his native country. Overseas study should emanate, then, from a sense of intellectual purpose which should expand the student's understanding of himself, as well as of his own and the foreign culture. It can also help fulfill the student's professional goals. That is a tall order. But it is only in that context that the objectives of overseas study programs can be looked upon as providing singular benefits to the participants.

PROGRAM INGREDIENTS

Molding the structure of a program to fit its objectives is a demanding task, and might require, in the end, accommodation on both counts.

What of the fields of study to be offered students abroad? A persuasive approach, it appears to me, is to investigate the comparative academic strengths of the prospective foreign host institution in relation to those of the American campus desiring to launch a program. In what fields does the foreign university offer courses which are not provided here, or if given here, are offered abroad in some way that could be singularly enriching for our students? An example in point is the Buffalo program at the University of Grenoble, France. While Buffalo offers prospective teachers of French, student teaching in American classrooms, experience in Grenoble classrooms brings a unique dimension into our students' lives. Through the observation of French problems, curricula and teacher-student relations, refreshing ideas find their way into our students own classrooms.

Also, to be addressed, is whether instruction should take place in regular university classes. If there are to be special classes provided for American students who are not sufficiently prepared in the foreign language or in course materials to enter the foreign lecture hall, should foreign professors be employed to teach them, as well as tutors to assist them with outside assignments? The answers lie in the admission requirements to the program with respect to the level of student, grades, foreign language preparation and relevant courses completed. The admission requirements are intended to flesh out the program objectives.

ADMISSIONS

To recruit students who are qualified to meet Buffalo objectives, we require that they write an essay, which carefully explains why overseas study is important. No generalizations are taken seriously, only a thoughtful response. The essay helps measure whether a student's background and interests mesh with program objectives. An interview report focuses on oral ability; typically, the student discusses with a faculty member or administrator a contemporary topic on the country in which the student wishes to study. Three supportive references ask pointed questions to determine academic and social qualifications. A foreign language report requires that the student demonstrate, in writing and orally, a certain proficiency. The language evaluator indicates whether the student is prepared, or will need further preparation, to undertake overseas study in a particular program. Transcripts are used as another basis for determining academic qualifications. A

medical statement seeks information on the student's mental stability to undertake successfully a foreign experience, with its share of frustrations and anxieties. It also asks the physician for any history of non-medicinal drug use. There is, potentially, a greater risk of incarceration abroad in view of the general "hard-line" attitude toward drug users, and the expeditious fashion with which one can find himself in jail with little hope of locating a key for walking out!

None of the prescribed admission procedures are fool-proof, but they reflect an awareness of proven tools which help to identify qualified applicants, and increase the likelihood of students obtaining a wealth of experience abroad. The four-pronged thrust of our admission criteria, then, is a rigorous test of academic, social, physical and psychological fitness.

OVERSEAS ACADEMIC EVALUATIONS

What provision can be made for using the evaluations for work completed overseas as a basis for giving credits and grades to student participants?

The resident directors of Buffalo programs convert the foreign professors' evaluations into American grades and credit as the recommended final assessment of the student's work. American professors' grades and credits are accepted by the resident director without any adjustment. The Americans are usually faculty from the home campus.

It is important to note that my office receives course descriptions and all recommended grades and credit from our directors of study programs overseas. It acts as the central campus point for the transmittal of recommended evaluations either directly to our departments or to the Registrar.

The appropriate departments on campus make the final judgements, based on course descriptions, and send their decisions to the Registrar. Often, departments are in accord with the recommendation of the program director, who is thoroughly familiar with the State University of New York's evaluation system. For non-State University of New York students, the recommended evaluations of the program director are sent from my office directly to our Registrar for recording on transcripts which are sent to the home campus.

In order to assure our students that they will receive grades and credits for work completed abroad, my office has devised a form to protect participants from changes in faculty personnel and poor memories. The form asks for a listing of specific courses which the student plans to take for credit, as well as in general fields, in those instances where it is not certain before a student departs what specific courses will be offered

through the program, especially those given at a foreign university. Letter or pass/fail grades are also agreed to on the form. A copy of the form, signed by both the student and the faculty member concerned, is retained by them and my office.

PROGRAM ORIENTATIONS

A program without a thorough orientation is destined for failure. Perhaps too much in orientations has been devoted to factual presentations of another country's history and university life, as an introduction to its culture.

Although important, historical accounts do not come to grips with the kinds of problems and challenges students will face. Students should be alerted, promptly after acceptance into programs, to what it will be like abroad so they can ask themselves whether they are mentally prepared to undertake a foreign experience. Role playing on campus is one vehicle we have employed to help place our students, with foreign language handicaps, in the emotional context of engaging in common situations overseas. No English is permitted in experiencing a simulated encounter. We have focused on this approach in our pre-departure orientations, which act as the final screening of our students after they have been selected into our programs. A theoretical and practical approach to inter-cultural communications, largely based on different value systems, is also presented. The pre-departure orientation further briefs students on current American issues and problems which might come up in discussions with sophisticated foreigners. Facts on the foreign culture are introduced through outside reading lists. We must be doing something right, for we have had no one drop out after the orientation sessions and have had few students with serious adjustment problems abroad.

The campus pre-departure orientation is staffed by faculty and student returnees, as well as visiting foreign students and professors of the host country where the program is located. To have any lasting effect, the sessions are held for usually 6 hours, for 2 hours on alternate days. Practical considerations during the school year and summers prevent any further orientation.

A full elaboration of salient characteristics of the culture and its universities, and a brief presentation of the history, are given upon arrival in the host country, mostly by local staff of the foreign university. The major portion of time is devoted to intensive foreign language instruction. The on-site orientation runs from three to six weeks prior to the start of the academic program, and is offered for credit to encourage students strongly to use this opportunity to help ease their transition into the foreign culture.

Field trips organized by the students and/or with the resident director's assistance

can be an integral part of both the student's cultural and academic experience abroad. Our Salamanca summer program, for instance, offers, prior to classes, a one week field trip which traces the route of El Cid. Students are expected to write a paper for credit based on their travel, as part of a required course in Spanish literature offered in Salamanca. Our summer program in England, concerned with the "open classroom", involves visits to primary schools, using that educational approach, discussions with British teachers, and participation in their classrooms. Such field trips have meaningful carry-over into program participants' own classrooms.

EXPENSES

A fundamental, major consideration for any student interested in applying to an overseas program is: what will it cost? The rule of thumb at Buffalo is, try, wherever possible, to keep program costs overseas equivalent to those non-commuting students would incur for a similar period of study on campus. We have found that rising tuition, housing and food costs overseas, plus incidental expenses, often can now approximate those costs on campus, particularly when the cost of international transportation is added.

I make these statements in connection with programs in continental Europe, with the full awareness that additional costs are bourne by the student in programs in other parts of the world. It is in these situations where the greatest challenge besets the campus administrator or faculty member who is faced with paring costs to make a program both operative and effective.

PRE-DEPARTURE INFORMATION

There are a number of housekeeping considerations which need to be carefully handled and timed so that the information reaching the student is helpful when he needs it the most in order to facilitate his stay abroad. I am speaking about information to be furnished on international travel arrangements, passports, visas, if any, innoculations, health insurance, method of payment towards program costs, financial guarantee and student responsibility in the program, the transfer of personal money abroad, the severe penalties for using drugs, the shipment of excess baggage and background reading in preparation for overseas study.

Let me speak to several of these points in order to shed light on possible procedural steps for other American campuses to consider for their programs overseas. A simple sentence or two indicating our services does not adequately reflect the amount of time

and effort spent in making them possible.

My office has arranged coverage with an insurance company whose sole operation is concerned with foreign study in cases where students' present policies do not cover basic medical, major medical, accidental death and dismemberment, and baggage insurance overseas. We consider such coverage mandatory, based on our experience, and relatively inexpensive. Coverage is provided for about $9.00 for each month the student is abroad.

We require that the parents of student participants under 21 years of age and, those over 21, sign a financial guarantee statement that they will meet the costs of the program. They also agree in writing to the student's adherence to the aims and requirements of the program. One specific statement deals with the prohibition against the use of drugs for non-medicinal purposes. Such an infraction means dismissal from the program.

As a service to students, we have made arrangements for our campus health center to administer innoculations required for overseas stays, rather than ask students to make individual appointments with physicians. We also supply the names of shipping companies, dealing with student excess baggage on a mass scale, that may afford students discount rates.

Information on all housekeeping considerations are presented to our students as a packet of separate memoranda which is included with their letter of acceptance. The format for these materials provide an interchangeable, uniform procedure for transmitting information relevant to all our programs.

We have also devised a student handbook which sets forth considerations in choosing a program and others to be looked into before departure. It also provides systematic campus procedures for obtaining official absence for overseas study. One focus of the handbook is on registration for foreign study, and how to obtain grades and credits. Other student concerns are also answered such as innoculations, where to obtain an international student I.D. card, and the options for financial assistance to help cover expenses while abroad. I will not relate specifics on this, since peculiarities in approach are governed by the policy and practices of individual campuses. We have found such contents in a handbook to be a most valuable aid to students.

ROLE OF STUDY ABROAD ADVISORY COMMITTEE

How is the quality of overseas programs controlled and policy set to implement them?

A common, proven instrument employed is the Program Advisory Committee, or sometimes called the Study Abroad Committee. Buffalo has found that from four to six

members comprise an effective group of interested faculty and an administrator, like myself, who has charge of the daily operations of the program. Student returnees give the student point of view and provide invaluable input. Two-year membership provides continuity. A campus with several, diversified programs abroad is advised to have different committees representing programs. It cannot be stressed enough that the Advisory Committee is responsible for giving the program its coloration, direction and different emphases. Practically speaking, such variables are often dependent upon the personalities involved, and the circumstances influencing the committee's decision making.

The committee screens student applicants in accordance with the program objectives and requirements, emphasizing quality. Typical policy questions are concerned with the probation and dismissal of students. Another major task of the committee is to select and appoint highly qualified resident directors for programs each year.

THE PROGRAM RESIDENT DIRECTOR

Buffalo publicizes openings for resident directors, campus-wide. Those faculty whose vitae, supporting letters, and reasons for seeking the appointment, appear to fit the needs of the program, are interviewed. Discussions are conducted in English, as well as in the language of the country where the program is situated. In the interview, every effort is made to try to determine the candidate's genuine interest in, commitment to and concern for students, the primary issues for consideration in this writer's judgement.

What might the Advisory Committee consider to be justifiable occasions for using a resident director? What might be his qualifications and duties?

The resident director is the field leader for any undergraduate program which is large enough to warrant his presence full-time.

The resident director should demonstrate a knowledge of the language, educational system and culture of the country to which he will be assigned. A workable rapport with students, as I have said, is highly important. He must have the ability to deal effectively and diplomatically with the problems of individual students, as well as those involving the academic and administrative sides of the program affecting relationships with the host institution or foreign community. He must possess organizational and management skills necessary to operate the program effectively, and conduct negotiations for a program the succeeding year. He must demonstrate sound judgement in handling the budget. When it is part of the program plan, the resident director should have qualifications to teach in the program, or at the host institution abroad. He must evince an understanding of, and

commitment to, the objectives of overseas study. He must have academic rank in order to give him the stature necessary to work effectively with colleagues at home, as well as those at the host institution, so that the program will gain acceptance and respect. His health and family situation should be considered as having a direct bearing on his performance.

Candidates should be informed in the recruitment materials that the program director's position is not a sinecure. It is a demanding, rewarding job, often requiring one's energies seven days a week for the length of the program. The following duties can be cited: supervising the settling of students in housing; arranging their academic programs; managing the budget; hiring and supervising any adjunct instructors in the program; counseling students on both academic and personal matters; organizing and participating in the on-site orientation; planning field trips, if desirable; carrying on liaison with the home campus and host institution; translating student grades into American terms, if necessary; certifying to the home campus satisfactory work completed overseas; carrying out public relations functions with the host institution and local community; and preparing a final evaluation of the program.

In order to encourage the most qualified candidates to apply, faculty, acting as resident directors abroad, should continue to be considered as members of the faculty at home, and thus enjoy the same salary, benefits, rank, and consideration for promotion, that he would on campus. Not to do so, is symptomatic of the problems all to frequently experienced on campuses that overseas programs are a frill and not an integral part of academic programs.

How can the new program director learn thoroughly what is expected of him overseas? He should know in advance of departure with whom he will be dealing, the procedures he will follow, and all the duties he will perform. He should arrange for briefings with such campus units as the business office, the registrar, department heads, academic advisors of student participants, student returnees, appropriate foreign students and professors, the previous program director(s) and others who might provide him with useful information to help him carry out his tasks successfully.

In a period of acute retrenchment, program Advisory Committees may have to re-think the kinds of leadership available overseas for programs. With cutbacks in staff, with or without tenure, being made, it will be increasingly difficult for faculty to be released for overseas assignments.

Foreign university personnel and graduate students are natural substitutes for the American professor. There are, however, drawbacks to each. The mature graduate

student, versed in the foreign language, lacks the stature to carry out some of the tasks required of the resident director; foreign university personnel do not necessarily have knowledge about the American higher educational system, and the needs and concerns of American students, in order to handle the job well. Compromise, however, can be reached in both cases. Graduate students can handle the day-to-day operation of the program; dealing with the foreign university over policy matters, for instance, can be the periodic assignment of a faculty member from home, or one from another of the campus programs nearby. There are, of course, foreign personnel, who, having been visiting professors in America, are sufficiently familiar with our system to enable them to act as resident directors. Nonetheless, because of their possible limited experience with, and a commitment to, overseas programs, their quality may suffer. It is up to Program Advisory Committees to see that high standards are barely affected.

EVALUATION OF PROGRAMS

No program will improve significantly without evaluations from student participants and resident directors.

A questionnaire, given to students at the end of the program, is one helpful way to receive evaluative feedback. The areas of concern are pre-program aspects, the academic program abroad, the overseas facilities, and the general cultural experience.

On the pre-program aspects, we ask such questions as, how did you learn about the program? Was the publicity adequate and accurate? Comment on the application, selection process, the orientation and travel arrangements.

Concerning the calibre of the academic program, we ask whether its stated objectives were achieved in the student's experience. We ask for views on the courses taken, as to content, the effectiveness of instruction, and testing and grading. Also, was there sufficient opportunity for the student to improve his command of the foreign language? Finally, we ask whether the stay overseas has benefited the student's academic career, and how relevant it may be to his future plans.

We seek student comments on the adequacy of foreign classrooms, library, housing, food and health services, and local transportation. We ask for the students' impressions of the program director's performance, as academic and social counselor.

We inquire what the foreign cultural experience has done to broaden the student's understanding of his and the host country.

In short, we wish to know students' recommendations for program improvements, and whether they can recommend the program to others. It can be said that the student's

oral and written evaluations are the most valuable in reviewing a program, since the student has no particular "axe to grind" in continuing it.

Debriefings provide a logical follow-up to the written evaluative questionnaire, which sometimes contains strong, subjective commentary that leaves one very much in the dark about the actual quality of programs. A dialogue among a group of student returnees invites a distillation of facts, checks unwarranted criticism and tends to place a program in proper perspective. A case in point was the early return to the Buffalo campus of several undergraduate students who were participating in one of our programs abroad.

> *The writer did not know how much of the disturbing reports reaching him he should believe. When the returnees were brought together to discuss the program, however, it became apparent....that some of the criticisms could be ruled out, reduced, or modified, primarily because the students simply had not adapted well overseas. What remained gave less cause for ligitimate complaint. The expression of those grievances did, however, help to improve the program.* [1]

A student article in the campus newspaper or his talk to the international relations club, are not adequate means to examine a program fully and fairly.

Obtaining the program director's insights into the academic and administrative aspects of the program are also important. Areas of concern, which my office raise with students in the questionnaire, are also contained in the program director's final report to the Program Advisory Committee, although often the questions asked of him have a different emphasis. For instance, what major variations from the stated program objectives did you have to employ? Why were they introduced? Did they strengthen the program? What features of the program curriculum could not be gained through home campus instruction? Comment on the calibre and effectiveness of the instruction provided. Did the students adjust academically and culturally? Was their orientation adequate to prepare them for the foreign experience? What opportunities did they have for significant immersion in the culture? How would you define the role and responsibilities of the program director in light of your experience? These are a few of the logistic questions asked. Were the payments to, and other arrangements with, the host institution satisfactorily handled? Was communication adequate between you, the host institution, and home campus? Finally, what problems do you envisage for the program, owing to its nature and character? What overall recommendations can be made for improvement?

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1. Michielli, James A. "The Study Abroad Adviser on Campus: An Expanding Role". *Exchange*, summer 1969, p. 52.

Obviously, preparing the answers to such questions requires a great deal of time and effort. We deem detailed responses vital to continuing to attract high caliber students and faculty.

It is important that effective mechanisms be found to ease the student's re-entry to his home campus, and offset a frequent tendency to over-identify with the foreign culture. De-briefing sessions that stress sharing experiences in reflective dialogue help instill a sense of direction in re-entering the home culture. The student, then, does not leave the overseas experience feeling uprooted, but attains some sense of continuity.

I want to devote the remainder of my remarks to two other essential steps in establishing an overseas program: the on-site, initial, exploratory visit and publicity.

EXPLORATION FOR NEW PROGRAMS

Exploring the possibility of developing a study program with a foreign university, by mail, telephone and cable, reaches a stage where it becomes impracticable to work out arrangements further without an on-site visit by a campus representative, supported by interested faculty and authorized by a senior administrative officer.

In order to achieve the fullest results, the on-site representative should be thoroughly familiar with the blueprint of the proposed overseas academic program and its objectives. He should be knowledgeable about the language, culture and educational system of the potential host country. He should also be an acute observer, tactful discussant and an accurate reporter. The faculty member, who has both teaching and administrative experience, presents the ideal combination necessary for carrying out the task.

He should arrive at agreement with representatives of the prospective host institution on such considerations as, whether any special instruction outside the regular curriculum would be necessary to meet the needs of the proposed program. How many students could be accommodated? Would a program director be needed and, if so, what responsibilities for instruction, if any, would he have? What arrangements can be worked out to transcribe student evaluations from the host institution to the grading system of the American campus sponsoring the program? The campus representative should determine the instructional costs, average living expenses and pocket money required. Needed instructional and housing facilities of the host institution should be reserved. If private housing is planned, he should learn what the prospects are for locating reliable families, and how they might be contacted. Adjustments in university calendars should be done. The representative should determine the prevailing rates for hiring part-time local

personnel, such as a secretary for the program, as well as the purchase and rental of office equipment. It is his responsibility to collect all relevant information regarding clothing, climate, health services, and cultural and recreational facilities. He should set the time for launching the program well in advance of completing all the necessary aforementioned arrangements so that unforeseen delays will not hinder the program from getting off to a solid start, as planned. The campus representative, as the negotiator for his institution, should be extremely careful to ensure that a common understanding exists on both sides with respect to conditions, responsibilities and costs. It is prudent that all program arrangements be confirmed by the home campus through the endorsement of appropriate faculty, and the conclusion of an agreement with the host institution by a senior campus official. This may take the form of an exchange of presidential letters, or a legal contract which would consummate and formalize the program between the universities.

PUBLICIZING PROGRAMS

Instruments for publicity are many and vary in effectiveness. Most common are campus posters, memoranda to departments, letters to potentially interested students, press releases for TV and radio, paid advertising and free space in campus newspapers, and recruitment meetings with slides, other media and student returnees. We have found that the most successful approach, particularly in recruiting students from other campuses, is to make announcements in their student newspapers. To be sure, there is no single way to enjoy effective publicity. A general guideline is, to use those which have proven to be most rewarding to a campus, and to improve those techniques, if possible, in order to gain greater success in recruiting high quality students. Also, to do so, it is advisable to publicize programs one year in advance. Certainly, by the start of the Christmas holidays, interested students should have information on programs to be able to discuss them with parents.

CONCLUSION

Let me end on a futuristic note. With retrenchment and inflation adversely affecting campus budgets, more consortia of American universities and colleges seem to be one way to pool limited resources effectively in order to help fill proven programs overseas, with qualified students and faculty, and meet operating costs. More and more, smaller campuses, in particular, are faced with eliminating their overseas programs because they cannot afford to continue them alone in light of existing priorities.

I hope that your campuses will find useful some of the procedures for establishing

sponsored study abroad programs I have discussed, today. I have also tried to give a clear indication of what the implications are. The often complex procedures involved require that each step leading to final establishment be thorough, well-planned, innovative and related so that, together, they comprise a series of safeguards, which will help ensure that programs are well established, as well as lay a solid foundation for their improvement, as circumstances may dictate.